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Parsifal, Deutsche Oper Berlin 19.iv.19

Parsifal. Brandon Jovanovich (Parsifal), Elena Pankratova (Kundry), Mathias Hausman (Amfortas), Günther Groissböck (Gurnemanz), Andrew Harris (Titurel), Derek Welton (Klingsor), Burkhard Ulrich, Byung Gil Kim (Grail Knights), Alexandra Hutton, Annika Schlicht, Paul Kaufmann, James Kryshak (Squires), Netta Or, Alexandra Hutton, Irene Roberts, Nicole Haslett, Cornelia Kim, Annika Schlicht (Flowermaidens), Annika Schlicht (Voice from above); orchestra and chorus of the Deutsche Oper Berlin/Donald Runnicles; Philipp Stölzl (director), Mara Kurotschka (Co-Regie), Conrad Moritz Reinhardt, Philipp Stölzl (sets), Kathi Maurer (costume design), Ulrich Niepel (lighting). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 19 April 2019

Philipp Stölzl's production of *Parsifal* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin opened in 2012: its 2014 revival was reviewed in *The Wagner Journal* (vol. 8 no. 2). This latest revival brought to the principal roles an entirely new cast to that fielded on either previous occasion, and offered an opportunity to re-assess a visually and conceptually intriguing take on Wagner's final masterpiece.

Stölzl's staging is characterised by the interpolation of a number of dumb shows, presenting key moments in the back-story and in the development of the drama. Thus during the Act I prelude there is a vivid presentation of the crucifixion of Christ, showing his death, the piercing of his side by the Roman soldier's spear, the collection of his blood in a chalice, and his deposition from the cross: we are also introduced to Kundry, as a spectator at these events. During Gurnemanz's Act I narration we are presented with Kundry's seduction of Amfortas, and his wounding by Klingsor: with two angels presenting the spear and grail to Titurel: with Klingsor's self-castration, and his summoning-up of his Flowermaidens; and

with Titurel sending out Amfortas in combat. In Act II, the prelude accompanies a vivid tableau of Klingsor as priest-shaman in an Aztec-style Temple, using the spear to carve out the heart of a sacrificial victim being held down by the Flowermaidens: later, his description of Parsifal fighting his way through his magic kingdom is illustrated by the hero doing precisely that, in slow-motion, across the roof of the Temple. In Act III, similar dumb-shows accompany Gurnemanz's telling of Amfortas' refusal to enact the grail ritual, and of Titurel's consequent death. All these dramatic interpolations are beautifully staged and lit, and enhance significantly the story-telling which is so important a part of *Parsifal*.

The basic set for the production is a rocky, desert-like landscape, with a ravine running through it, and acting areas for the tableaux placed high in this landscape to the left and right. In Act I Monsalvat is seen as a castle at the rear of the stage: in Act III it is replaced by a ruin. In Act II Klingsor's Temple is placed in the gap in the rocks. To the right is a pool, to which Amfortas is taken to bathe in Act I: in Act III a modern street-light hangs over it, and Parsifal is washed, and then anointed, in it. The processions of Acts I and III enter through the ravine. In Act I the procession consists of penitents, some in white robes and hoods, some half-naked and flagellating themselves, whilst in Act III Amfortas appears, Christ-like, carrying a cross, being whipped by onlookers and eventually collapsing.

In the first two acts the characters are dressed in a vaguely mediaeval style: robes, cloaks, and chain mail for the knights, with Klingsor in an elaborate costume suggestive of esoteric ritual. Parsifal alone wears modern dress. (At his first entrance, his killing of the swan is illustrated simply by his bloodied hands, and by white feathers sticking to his arms.) The ending of each of these acts brings surprises: in Act I, all the knights swoon during the 'communion' scene, only to rise up and face the audience, brandishing swords menacingly, at the words 'zu kämpfen mit seligem Mute'. At the end of Act II, the 'sign' by which Parsifal

banishes Klingsor's magic involves stabbing him in the back and seizing the spear from him as he dies.

In Act III all characters wear modern dress. From the outset the stage in this Act is populated by extras, who initially appear to be taking part in an archaeological dig: on his arrival, Parsifal hands the spear to them, and they receive it reverentially, as though it were a relic they had uncovered. After his anointing by Gurnemanz it is these extras, rather than Kundry, who are baptised by Parsifal. Kundry refuses his ministrations and, as a consequence, is dragged to the pool by the extras and forcibly baptised herself during the Good Friday Music. At the conclusion of Act III, Parsifal stabs Amfortas with the spear, killing him, and the grail ritual is re-enacted to the ecstatic delight of all present – apart from Kundry, who faces the audience with a mute scream.

Musically, standards were high. Günther Groissböck has matured in recent years into an outstanding Gurnemanz, tireless, powerful, and displaying sonorous bass tones. As Kundry, Elena Pankratova likewise must surely be considered one of the outstanding exponents of this role today: her voice was utterly secure throughout, and she also acted well, conveying both the arrogance and the pathos of this most complex of characters. Andrew Harris was a strong Titurel: Derek Welton certainly had all the notes for Klingsor, but he sounded more jovial than malevolent. Mathias Hausman was rather light-timbred for Amfortas, but still put across well the agonies of the grail king. The DOB chorus was its usual excellent self – the offstage singing at the end of Act III, in particular, was beautifully balanced and pitched. Donald Runnicles displayed the skills of a great Wagner conductor in his ability to make an hour pass in what felt like fifteen minutes, and his orchestra were outstanding, save for one or two slightly tired-sounding passages from the brass towards the end.

What does Stöltzl's production of *Parsifal* add up to? His staging joins others (like Tcherniakov's across town on Unter den Linden) which see the Grail community as dangerous fanatics, and he appears to be suggesting that the encounter of modern perspectives (those of Parsifal, and of the archaeologists in Act III) with them can lead to the latter taking on the violence and fanaticism that inevitably accompany the former. At one level, this may be seen as simply another reiteration of a rather tired contemporary trope about cults in particular and religions in general (as has been endlessly pointed out, by no means all religious communities are composed of fanatics, and the achievements of their adherents are – to say the least – rather more complex than this analysis maintains). On another level, this production might perhaps be seen as a comment on precisely that contemporary attitude.

Attempting to read the thought-world of one time through the categories of a later one always leads to the risks of misrepresentation and confusion. (Wagner's reading of Christian ideas and symbolism through a Schopenhauerian lens means that this is a risk which is built in to the warp and weft of *Parsifal* as a work of art.) In particular, the ascription of univocal meanings to the rites and symbols which are key to the functioning of religious communities risks misreading them, and can lead to their usurpation by the unscrupulous. Parsifal and the other moderns in this production might therefore serve as a warning of how a modernist perspective can simply fail to understand a religious one, with disastrous results. Like most social, political or philosophical systems, religious systems can be forces for both good and harm. Stöltzl's illustration here of how harm can arise from their misappropriation is both apt, and challenging.